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ABSTRACT

Much research on masculinity and femininity has relied on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) and similar androgyny inventories. Recently, investigators have questioned whether self ratings on androgyny inventories reflect salient dimensions of the self. The relations between spontaneous self descriptions and the respondent's gender and gender role were examined in 503 undergraduates. Males and females categorized by their responses on the BSRI short form as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated provided open-ended responses to the query "I AM" which were coded according to their gender-related and gender-neutral content. Results indicated that gender role influenced the frequency with which gender-related traits were used in self descriptions. Persons categorized as masculine or feminine more frequently used desirable masculine and feminine personality traits, respectively, in their self descriptions. Androgynous persons used both sets of desirable traits in describing themselves. These findings suggest that androgyny inventories, such as the BSRI, may provide valid measures of desirable masculine and feminine traits in the self concept. However, there was little correspondence between gender role and self references to gender behaviors. Moreover, the predominance of gender neutral traits in self descriptions suggested that the salience of gender to the self concept may be overestimated. (Author/NRB)

Self Concept and Gender Role:

An Open-Ended Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The relations between spontaneous self descriptions and the respondents' gender and gender role were examined in this research. Males and females categorized as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated provided open-ended responses to the query "I AM" which were coded according to their gender-related and gender-neutral content. Results indicated that gender role influenced the frequency with which gender-related traits were used in self descriptions. However, there was little correspondence between gender role and self references to gender behaviors. Moreover, the predominance of gender neutral traits in self descriptions suggested that the salience of gender to the self concept may be overestimated.

Since Constantinople's (1973) landmark critique of the masculinity-feminity construct research on the personality and behavioral correlates of masculinity and femininity has proliferated. Much of this research has relied on contemporary androgyny inventories, e.g., the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI: Bem, 1974) to operationalize masculinity and femininity and to categorize individuals on these dimensions. In a recent series of studies Myers and Gonda (1982a, 1982b) challenged many of the underlying assumptions guiding the construction and use of these inventories. These investigators raised the important issue of whether or not self ratings on androgyny inventories reflect salient dimensions of the self. In this research we examined the correspondence between open-ended self descriptions and the gender roles of males and females.

In comparing spontaneous self descriptions to the items of the BSRI Myers and Gonda (1982a) found minimal overlap in the frequency of responses for any of the spontaneous categories. These findings were interpreted as supporting the suggestion that androgyny inventories may not tap dimensions of the self concept that are salient to the respondent (Cowan & Stewart, 1977; Locksley & Colten, 1979). Spence and Helmreich (1979) also noted that the salience of the masculinity and femininity items of androgyny inventories to an individual's self concept is still

undetermined.

Myers and Gonda (1982a) also reported no differences between the sexes or among the gender role groups with respect to the degree of overlap between spontaneous self descriptions and the BSRI items, although the specific item content was not examined for gender or gender role differences. However, differences in self descriptions were obtained as a function of response format and the situation used to elicit responses. These authors concluded that although persons may be aware of stereotypic sex differences, they do not necessarily evaluate themselves in terms of these cultural standards when completing androgyny inventories.

In the present research males and females, categorized as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated, provided open-ended self descriptions. Unlike previous research (Myers & Gonda, 1982a) subjects were not constrained to describe themselves in particular situations and the specific item content, rather than the degree of overlap with the BSRI items, was examined. An inclusive coding scheme was constructed to categorize respondents' self descriptive statements into eleven catogories of masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral references. Previous research on the positive and negative components of masculinity and femininity (Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan,

1979), sex role interests and activities (Orlofsky, Ramsden, & Cohen, in press), and components of gender stereotypes (Deaux & Lewis, 1983) was considered in developing the coding scheme so that the categories would reflect the diversity in participants' self descriptions.

METHODS

Participants were 503 undergraduates (159 males and 344 females) who received extra credit in their Introductory Psychology courses. Participants were asked to think about themselves for a moment and then to list up to ten characteristics that came to mind when they thought about themselves, in a column headed "I AM". The term "characteristics" was deliberately left undefined. Participants were encouraged to respond quickly and to provide candid responses, which were anonymous.

The short form of the BSRI (s-BSRI; Bem, 1981) was used to categorize subjects into the four gender role groups based on the sample medians (masculinity median = 4.999, feminity median = 5.698, on 7 point rating scales N = 1280). Participants completed the s-BSRI after the "I AM" responses, and after a number of intervening tasks, to be described elsewhere.

RESULTS

Two independent raters categorized subjects' self descriptive statements into one of the eleven catogories of gender-related or gender-neutral content (interrater reliability = 0.89). The category labels and percent responses for males and females in the four gender-role groups are presented in Table 1. One-way Chi square analyses were used to examine differences between the sexes, among the gender role groups, and among subject types, the latter variable defined by the combination of gender and gender role (e.g., masculine males).

The subject types differed in the frequency of references to Masculine Desirable Personality Traits (MDPT: χ^2 (7) = 38.69, $p<.001$). As indicated in Table 1, masculine and androgynous persons of both sexes used MDPT in their self descriptions more than did feminine persons of either sex. Undifferentiated males, but not females, least often described themselves in terms of MDPT.

Masculine persons, particularly males, more frequently referred to Masculine Interests and Behaviors (MIB) in their self descriptions, compared to feminine persons (χ^2 (7) = 43.90 $p<.001$). Undifferentiated males were just as likely as masculine males to use MIB to describe themselves, whereas undifferentiated females used this category as infrequently as feminine females, and less often than

masculine females.

Feminine and androgynous females used more Feminine Desirable Personality traits (FDPT) than masculine or undifferentiated females ($\chi^2(7) = 37.15$, $p<.001$). Masculine males used FDPT less often than all other male groups. Androgynous females used fewer Feminine Undesirable Personality Traits (FUPT) in their self descriptions than did the other female groups ($\chi^2(7) = 29.80$, $p<.001$).

It was the masculine female who was least likely to use Gender-Neutral Desirable Personality Traits (GNDPT) as self referents, compared to all other groups ($\chi^2(7) = 60.64$, $p<.001$). Both masculine and undifferentiated females used Gender-Neutral Undesirable Personality Traits (GNUPT) more than all of the male groups, except undifferentiated males, and somewhat more often than androgynous or feminine females. Masculine males used this category less often than the other male groups.

The gender role groups differed in the frequency of self references to MDPT ($\chi^2(3) = 23.31$, $p<.01$), FDPT ($\chi^2(3) = 19.72$, $p<.01$), and FUPT ($\chi^2(3) = 17.29$, $p<.01$). Masculine and androgynous persons used MDPT more than feminine persons. Feminine and androgynous persons used FDPT more than masculine persons. Undifferentiated persons more often described themselves in terms of FUPT than masculine person.

Males and females differed in the frequencies with

which they used MUPT ($\chi^2(1) = 10.67$, $p<.05$), MIB ($\chi^2(1) = 14.00$, $p<.05$), and FDPT ($\chi^2(1) = 12.59$, $p<.05$) in their self descriptions. Males were more likely to use the former two categories while females were more likely to describe themselves in forms of FDPT.

DISCUSSION

Gender and gender role of respondents related to open-ended self descriptions, when the latter were coded according to their gender-related and gender-neutral content. Persons categorized as masculine and feminine, using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, more frequently used desirable masculine and feminine personality traits, respectively, in their self descriptions. Androgynous persons used both sets of desirable traits in describing themselves. Consistent with research demonstrating a relation between gender role and self esteem (e.g., Spence & Helmreich, 1979), differences in the frequency with which undesirable personality traits were used in self descriptions were obtained. These findings suggest that androgyny inventories, like the BSRI, may provide valid measures of desirable masculine and feminine traits in the self concept.

However, the results also suggest that self references to gender-related personality trait dimensions may NOT be equivalent to self evaluations based on cultural gender stereotypes. In particular, with the exception of masculine males, there was little correspondence between gender role and the endorsement of gender appropriate behaviors. Moreover, gender was related to references to masculine

interests and behaviors, but not to feminine interests and behaviors. A partial explanation for the failure to find a strong correspondence between gender role and gender-related behaviors and between gender and gender related behaviors may lie in the infrequent use of these categories in self descriptions. A comparison of the relative frequencies across the categories reveals that when people are asked to describe themselves they think "personality" rather than behavior. It remains for future research to determine what factors are related to the use, and therefore salience, of gender-related behaviors to the definition of self, e.g., demographic characteristics.

Also with respect to self definition, it is important to note that participants, regardless of gender or gender role, overwhelmingly described themselves in terms of desirable gender-neutral personality traits. In fact, almost half of the responses fell into this category. While this result does not mitigate against the importance of gender to the self concept, it does suggests that people may be less preoccupied with gender than is psychological research. Alternatively, gender-related personality traits may not correspond to the meaning of masculinity and femininity for participants. Research is currently underway to investigate the correspondence between the meaning of these constructs, gender role categorizations, and spontaneous self descriptions.

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Table 1

Percentage of Responses in the Masculine/Feminine Coding Scheme Categories to the Open Ended Query "I AM"

Gender Role	Males M	Males F	Males A	Males U	Females M	Females F	Females A	Females U	All Males	All Females	All Subjects
n =	63	19	35	41	61	106	101	76	159	344	503
# of responses =	564	173	344	396	584	1018	975	732	1469	3309	4788
Gender References	1.06	2.94	0.29	0.25	0.86	0.98	0.62	1.23	0.88	0.91	0.90
Physical Attributes	8.16	12.35	5.56	5.85	7.71	7.76	7.08	5.60	7.42	7.07	7.16
Masculine Desirable Personality Traits * ×	10.11	4.71	7.31	4.58	12.50	4.52	7.59	8.74	7.35	7.68	7.56
Masculine Undesirable Personality Traits †	1.24	1.18	2.05	1.53	0.68	0.39	0.31	0.96	11.50	0.54	0.84
Masculine Interests and Behaviors † ×	4.79	1.18	2.34	4.07	2.46	1.37	1.74	1.37	3.61	1.81	2.36
Feminine Desirable Personality Traits † * ×	9.75	11.76	14.04	13.74	13.36	19.45	15.69	13.25	12.05	15.90	14.68
Feminine Undesirable Personality Traits * †	0	0.59	1.75	1.78	1.88	1.57	0.92	2.73	0.95	1.69	1.46
Feminine Interests and Behaviors	0.71	1.76	1.17	1.02	0.34	1.08	1.64	1.64	1.02	1.24	1.17
Gender-Unrelated Desirable Personality Traits ×	44.15	44.71	45.61	46.06	37.00	42.53	47.59	42.35	45.06	43.03	43.57
Gender-Unrelated Undesirable Personality Traits † ×	7.80	8.24	6.14	10.43	12,50	10.22	9.33	12.57	8.17	10.88	10.03
Gender-Unrelated Interests and Behaviors	3.37	2.94	4	4.07	4.28	2.36	3.08	2.87	3.74	3.02	3.24
Uncodable	8.51	7.06	9.	6.62	7.19	6.78	4.41	6.01	8.03	5.98	6.60

Note: M=Masculine, F=Feminine, A=Androgynous, U=Undifferentiated.

† The gender effect was significant in the one-way Chi square analysis.

* The gender role effect was significant in the one-way Chi square analysis.

× The type effect was significant in the one-way Chi square analysis.

(There were eight levels of "type" formed by the gender/gender role combinations). ($ps < .05$)